



'The new director of the BFI's National Film Theatre announced that the 'Carry On' comedies and James Bond pictures are barred except in an ideologically correct context'. (Above left: Hattie Jacques backed up by Barbara Windsor and part of the usual team in 'Carry On Camping'; and above right, Sean Connery and Shirley Eaton in 'Goldfinger')

that the New Ideologism is BFI-specific. For example, my local authority, nicknamed 'the Socialist Republic of Islington', spends about £40,000 per annum trying to stamp out Irish jokes as racist and pleading with London Irish shopkeepers not to stock such post cards. Yet last night I discovered that some of these exact same jokes are told by Minnesota Scandinavians against themselves!

New Class puritanism seem to be pushing towards something akin to Prohibition – only the demon is not drink, but anarchic personal politics. I'm sorry to see the BFI left forcing the pace towards a newly censorious climate, like a mirror image of America's New Right.

## The hour of a thousand flowers

THAT WAS the bad news, the good news is very good indeed. Taking film and TV together, the media have been giving the fullest, richest reflection of British life than ever in their history. Full-length, back and front, in-depth and X-ray. From under bowler hat and cloth cap they came; from behind the stiff upper lip; from the deepest closets of class – the weird variety of ways we live now. Culture pundits carry on grumbling, either through habit or because they despise the way the other classes live. But make the most of it folks, because this is it: the Golden Age. It may not last, and it certainly won't if agitprop notions of culture have their way.

The healthy culture is never a matter of towering masterpieces eclipsing everything else, nor Wunderkinder being lonely geniuses all the way to Hollywood. If you take these films separately, they're just little slices of life: sharp, clear, modest, perhaps even limited. But the aggregate becomes something else – a thousand and one little vignettes and vivisections. Only some components in this broader scene suit Stateside markets, but it's time to suggest the broader picture.

As exportable as Scotch is Bill Forsyth's wryness. It evokes the Ealing comedies, but Ealing was 'Home Counties' England looking out and down, whereas Forsyth's films come up from the grass roots.

Far more sullen is Forsyth's 'town cousin', Chris Petit. *Radio On* is a mystery-cum-landscape painting, in black-on-black: *Film noir* on punk. *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* takes up a riddle-of-the-sphinx theme. A quiet but persistent young woman (Pippa Guard) gets caught in two seeming suicides, her boss shooting himself, and a young, masochistic transvestite

hanging himself (Shades of Dolly Parton in a sack). The second suicide so fascinates her she imitates it, and nearly becomes a third. *Flight to Berlin* attempts a healthy criticism of this sulky British negativity, but 'struck me as overly Yanko-Germanic a la Wenders.

Closer to my home and heart was Les Blair's *Number One*, with Bob Geldof, Ian Dury and Mel Smith being the flora and fauna of London low life.

A similar pleasure in non-U mores warms David Puttnam's 'Young Love' series of movie/TV amphibians. As 'teenage nostalgia' they're English counterparts of *Diner* and *Racing for the Moon*. But they're much sadder and severer. *Winter Flight* is briefly as misanthropic as *Wetherby*, when a girl has to watch airforce rowdies make her overly sensitive lover drink beer laced with pub slops, ashtray contents and their piss.

Puttnam's favourite theme, again like Lean's, seems to be two people reaching out across a mean, sad, or strange human landscape – a killing field of a world which Romeo and Juliet, or David and Jonathan, might just redeem, for themselves. Except when each betrays the other. Like the priest and the academic who once were rockers together, in *Forever Young* (written by Ray Connolly, of *Star Dust* fame).

But one can't even list the films which, from *Baylon* (about duelling reggae DJs) to *Success is the Best Revenge*, by the émigré Pole, Jerzy Skolimowski, explore the crowded patchwork of British life.

Perhaps the richest field of treasure trove is 'the box' – where only about 10-15 million people see it. Channel 4 have been giving soap operas a sharper, harder edge with *Brookside*, about life in a Liverpool housing estate, and the BBC followed suit with the non-Ealing Cockneys of *East Enders*.

The sitcom, too, has come of age. Channel 4's *Struggle* does for local politics what *Hill Street Blues* does for the police, taking a friendly look at a 'Socialist Republic'-type local authority, charmingly depolarises the reciprocal paranoias. Several politicians have commented on the 100 per cent accuracy of *Yes, Minister*, about a cabinet minister's ceaseless battle of wits against his own bureaucratic advisors. Some sitcoms are toughly funky, like *Boys from the Blackstuff* (a road mending gang) and *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* (British bricklayers working in Germany). Without feeling obliged to provoke laughs, they tell quite harsh tales: straight, sad, and socially-critical.

The ideological left may complain about the form's inbuilt coseyness, but that looks to me more like an acceptable limitation. All discourse is a distancing (as in other contexts, these ideologues pretend they alone understand).

The TV companies' pride is their series of one-off filmed dramas (despite their name, often fully filmic, like TVMs). Since their variety defeats summary, I'll select two, that fill out some patterns here.

In Stephen Frear's *Going Gently*, a hospitalised old sufferer from cancer pulls himself together just enough to go on his last, free, walkabout, of the other wards. The actor is – Norman Wisdom, who'd been trying to play that role for many years. But who could believe that under the cloth-cum-schoolboy cap, and Fourth Stooze grimaces, was his sensitive mixture of Dunkirk face and modern bafflements?

The second comes from Mike Leigh, renowned for his theatrical improvisations, long, gruelling pieces about suffocated lower-class lives behind lace curtains. But he also devised this wistful-cheerful gem, all of five minutes long, in which a couple conceive and rear a child, and you know that to them, this is the *Birth of the Goalie in The 2001 FA Cup Team* It's an ordinary English dad's dream, with all the dampers on, and it doesn't matter whether the boy actually makes it or not: success is just a metaphor for what life's really all about.

Little of this fits the Masterpiece Theatre slot. But an old music-hall song about Britain is still too true. 'The strength is at the bottom and the froth is at the top.' Such is the richness of British TV (and not just for 'Eng. Lit.' or British studies or media analysis, but for disciplines like social anthropology), I really wish that the British Council, or some responsibly enthusiastic body, would make a real effort to spread its fame abroad.

Meanwhile, if the real Britain intrigues you, it's worth becoming a tourist just to watch TV. Especially if you combine it with discovering all the other Britains, from its industrial archaeology to street trader's chat-up, from the West Indians brightening cricket at Lords to – well, if you're brave and will risk your neck for strange thrills, go to a crucial soccer match, stand with one set of hard core fans, and hear their chants, taunts and songs.

From the anthem they sing for their team: 'You'll Never Walk Alone'. To the version they sing for the other team: 'You'll Never Walk Again'.





Life as it really was? . . .  
Paul Verhoeven's

# FLESH+BLOOD

. . . not a fairy tale fantasy

PAUL VERHOEVEN has been preparing *Flesh + Blood* for almost ten years. In the meantime he had established himself, and Dutch cinema, on the international scene mainly through his *Turkish Delight* (which was nominated for an Oscar as the Best Foreign Language Film), *Keetje Tippel*, *Soldier of Orange* (which won a Golden Globe in Hollywood), the controversial *Spetters*, a look at the life of Holland's teenagers, which established his reputation for uncompromising realism and *The 4th Man* a supernatural thriller which won the Los Angeles' Film Critics Award as Best Foreign Film in 1984.

In this, his first feature for a major American company, Verhoeven set out with two aims (a) to tell a rousing adventure story loosely inspired by such 16th century events as the siege of the city of Munster and (b) to show us ourselves in the

Captain Hawkwood (Jack Thompson)  
lays siege to a nobleman's castle



Paul Verhoeven (left) sees parallels between his view of the 16th century violence and that of the present day, in 'Flesh + Blood'



Martin (Rutger Hauer) takes Agnes hostage as he attempts to escape from his former mercenary colleagues

Agnes (Jennifer Jason Leigh), delighted by each new discovery that leads beyond her cloistered past

mirror of the past.

Says Verhoeven 'This is not a fairy tale because the Middle Ages were not a fairy tale. It was cruel, wanton, dangerous, stinking time in which to live. The miracle is that anyone survived. That's what the film is about . . . three people who survive, each in their own remarkable way.

'That . . . and an interesting question . . . how far have we come?'

In a mixture of social equality and feudal savagery in which his latest work had its origins, Verhoeven had long been fascinated by the life of John of Leiden, a 16th century firebrand. 'Perhaps', he explains, 'because my home is in Leiden, a university town in the Netherlands.

'In 1534, John of Leiden went to Germany and conquered the Catholic city of Munster. Those who refused to accept him as a prophet were cast out. In turn, they laid siege to the city'. It was what happened behind the walls of Munster that fascinates Verhoeven.

'Under John of Leiden's rule, everyone dressed alike, ate the same meals, worshipped together, and enjoyed a primitive kind of social security. Personal property was outlawed. Polygamy was permitted. 'There is no longer thine and mine' John proclaimed, a line we give the Cardinal in the film.

'As in most Communist societies . . . through the present day . . . dissention was not tolerated. John of Leiden put to death anyone who disagreed with him, taking considerably more pleasure in the act than one would expect of a prophet.

'When the Catholics finally stormed the city, they returned the favour . . . torturing the Baptists with remarkable invention, even for the cruel time. The atrocities of *Rambo* are child's

play compared to what was done to John of Leiden'.

Verhoeven's interest in such medieval lore grew during directing *Floris* in 1969 (which was also his first association with actor Rutger Hauer, who has starred in a number of Verhoeven's films including the present one) a popular Dutch television series, set in the 'age of chivalry'.

But the project he had in mind would take more freedom . . . and finance . . . than television could provide. And at that point he lacked sufficient film 'credentials'. During the next decade or so, and the production of the films which brought him international recognition (mainly *Turkish Delight* and *Spetters*) he and his producer Gys Versluys continued to nurture *Flesh + Blood*. Thousands of illustrations, manuscripts, costumes, weapons and medieval artifacts were gathered.

Verhoeven was fascinated, he says, by Barbara Tuchman's book *A Distant Mirror*. With its suggestion that the 'violent tormented, bewildered, suffering and disintegrating past' was a 'compelling and consoling' parallel to our own turbulent times.

'It's like looking in a mirror at an ancient landscape and your own face', explains Verhoeven.

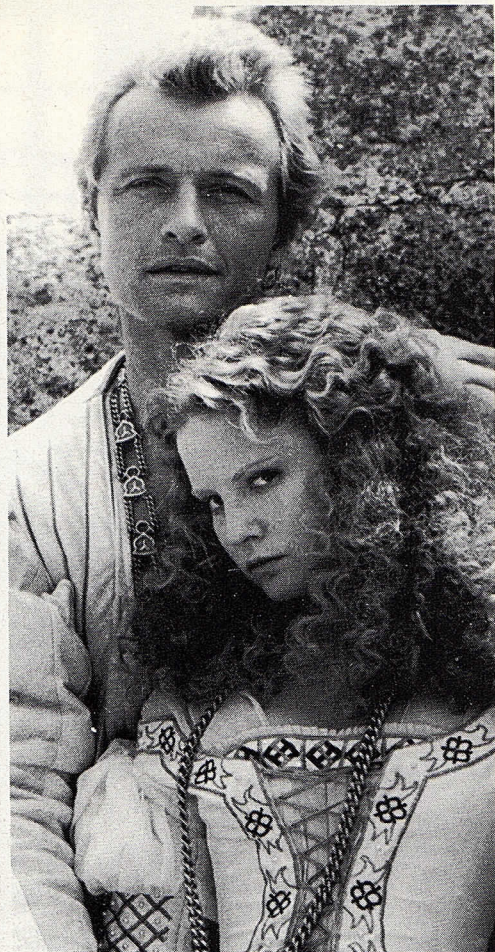
How valid is the concept?

'Think of the mob which stormed Beirut airport several months ago, so out of control that it terrified even the terrorists. Or the violence which erupted at the soccer stadium in Brussels in April. Imagine, people killing each other because of a game'.

As to his film being intentionally scattered with modern metaphors, he continues 'To capture the mercenary fortress, Captain Hawkwood







The mercenary Martin (Rutger Hauer) with Agnes (Jennifer Jason Leigh), who finds herself a 'prize of war'

(Jack Thompson) catapults chunks of plague-ridden meat over the walls . . . an early version of biological warfare.

'Until the soldiers find the statue of St Martin, they are just an aimless band, but Martin (Rutger Hauer as the resourceful renegade) siezes on the statue as an icon, a symbol that their vengeance is divinely decreed.

'That also strengthens his position of power. When the Cardinal (Ronald Lacey) says that all men should dress alike, Martin agrees . . . and suggest red. But as the leader, he and his women are entitled to wear white'.

To co-writer Gerard Soeteman, Agnes' (Jennifer Jason Leigh) character is more comprehensible when seen in modern terms. 'As the soldiers' hostage, she behaves as we've seen such victims do, many times, on television. She turns to Martin for protection, becomes his lover, even claims to understand his cause. Under pressure? From genuine conviction? Perhaps Patty Hurst can tell us.'

From the outset, adds Verhoeven, the challenge was to weave such considerations into 'an entertaining adventure story. Cinema is storytelling. Nothing else makes sense if the story doesn't work'.

Toward that end, he called on influences dating back to the films of Douglas Fairbanks and swashbucklers like *The Crimson Pirate*.

'One of my favourites', he says of the latter. 'It was full of marvellous inventions . . . submarines, balloons, infernal devices . . . which were ahead of their time.

'We do the same. When Steven (Tom Burlinson as the young Renaissance scholar to whom science is a religion, women are a distraction and war is a game) designs the *Tracatus de oppidis*, a cross between a Trojan

horse, a battering ram and a fireproof wooden tank, to try to penetrate the mercenary stronghold, you have the beginning of "mechanised warfare"'.

Of all the film's links between the past and the present, metaphorical or mechanical, the survival instinct is the strongest says Verhoeven.

'Martin, the opportunist, Steven, the scientist, and Agnes, the child/woman, have a more powerful connection that their passion for . . . or against . . . each other. They do whatever they must to make the best of the worst circumstances. To survive'.

To create authenticity of the period both director and producer set out on a series of location trips which took them to castles, ruins and isolated villages throughout Europe. Sites in Rumania, Hungary, Germany, Italy and Yugoslavia were considered (and rejected) before three locations in Spain (Blemonte, Caceras and Avila) were chosen.

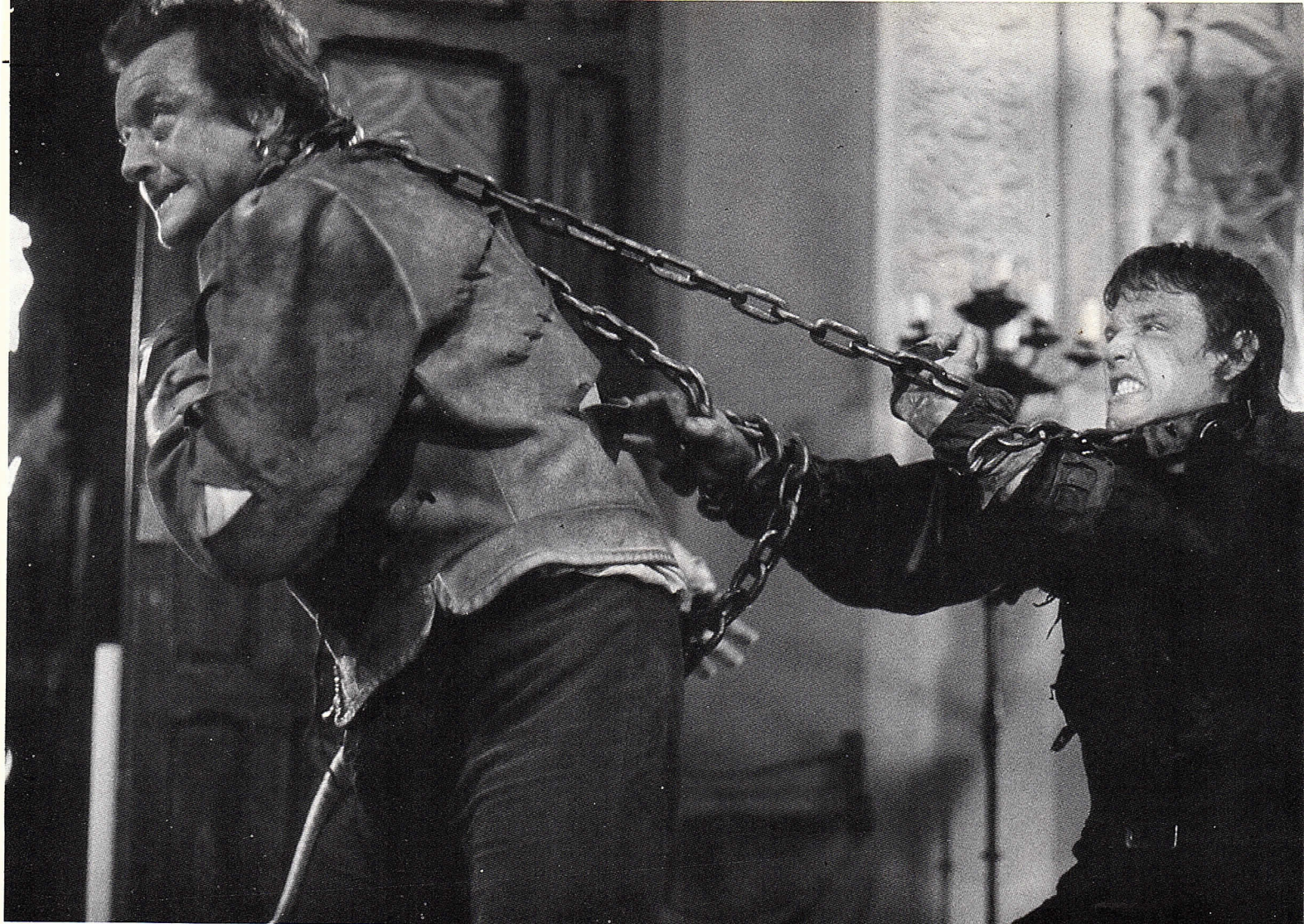
'The showcase was Belmonte Castle, which was used once before in the making of *El Cid*', explains Versluys. 'But that was many years ago and by the time we arrived, the fortress was in a state of magnificent disrepair'.

The challenge of making it structually sound, without jeopardising its 15th century character, was entrusted to art director Felix Murcia who describes his task as 'a fascinating puzzle. In order to make the castle safe for the actors, the construction team had to work under extremely hazardous conditions'. Floors were reinforced and laid with mosaic tiles; vast cathedral ceilings were repaired, whitewashed, then hung with blazing chandeliers; battlements were built above crumbling stone bastions; a moat was cut into the promontory surrounding the castle. The weather, dependable only in terms of freezing

Martin leads a wretched band of mercenaries into battle (below), in which the idealistic Steven (Tom Burlinson) resorts to the violence of the age (right)







rain and gusting winds, complicated the process.

'If any of us had read Charlton Heston's autobiography beforehand, we might have stayed at home', observes Murcia. 'He paraphrases Mark Twain, referring to the coldest winter of his life as the summer he spent making *El Cid*.'

When the restoration was complete, it not only provided an atmospheric background for the film's climatic sequences, but posed a problem for local authorities. Having committed the production crew to leave the castle as they found it, Spanish officials were so impressed with the authenticity of Murcia's designs that, at last report, they were still debating whether to make them permanent!

Tom Burlinson, who had hit some pretty uncomfortable, terrains in Australia during the filming of *The Man From Snowy River* and *Phar Lap*, also found out what Heston meant.

'They told me Spain and I thought of sunny nights, romantic music, flashing eyes... you know, travel poster images. Instead we got Mother nature's bag of tricks'.

In on scene, Burlinson, covered in rags and blood, is chained to a post in the castle courtyard. A lightning storm erupts, drenching the pitiful figure.

'It was so cold', he recalls, 'that the artificial rain turned to snow'.

Later in the same sequence, the actor is obliged to toss a piece of meat into a well from a distance of some 30 feet. 'The way Paul set up the shot, there was no faking, no cross-cutting, the meat had to land in the well'. To rehearse the scene the actor asks the prop department to cut a few foam pillows to the correct size and weight them with lead. Using a bushel basket as a target, he spent the weekend practising.

One passing tourist couple became curious.

'American?' the man asked.

Burlinson shook his head.

'Basketball player?' the wife inquired. Again,

Burlinson said no.

'What, then?' the tourist asked.

'I couldn't resist,' says Burlinson. 'I told then the absolute truth... that I was practising throwing plague-infested dogmeat into a well. I'm sure they still think they met a lunatic on their travels.'

'On the plus side, I did hit the well on the first take'.

In Avila, Verhoeven staged the spectacular battle in which Arnolfini's army regains his birthplace. One of Spain's highest cities above sea level, it was chosen for its beautifully preserved fortress walls, surrounded by picturesque sloping hills.

Since explosives were introduced in combat in the 15th century, Verhoeven called on the special effects team to fill the sky with dense smoke and hurtling debris. They obliged by setting fire to literally thousands of used car tyres, acquired from a local salvage yard.

'We left the hotel each morning, crisp, clean and neat' recalls Verhoeven. 'And we returned at night covered in soot from head to toe, with blackened faces like coalminers... or perhaps, more accurately, survivors of war.'

Such are the hazards of re-creating the 'realism of the past'. In choosing not to show the Middle Ages through myth and fantasy, to depict life of the people as it was really lived, certainly posed a lot of problems. The lighting by Jan de Bont was deliberately low-key, 'more Rembrandt than Renoir'... and at one point at Belmonte Verhoeven had another worry: 'I was afraid we might run into good weather. A bright blue sky is Disney. Gray skies, brown earth, crimson and forest green... that's history!'

Already this year we've seen a number of cinematic essays into the past: Richard Donner's captivating *Ladyhawke* (also with Rutger Hauer), Wolfgang Petersen's enchanting *The Neverending Story* and Ridley Scott's coldly

disappointing *Legend*. Verhoeven's *Flesh + Blood* seems nearer to the reality and disillusionment expressed in James Clavell's vastly under-rated epic on the last year of the Thirty Years wars, which again had parallels with 20th century life.

On *Flesh + Blood* Verhoeven concludes: 'If the picture succeeds, it is a kind of trip, for a few brief hours, into another century, into authentic drama.'

'You can go out into the sunlight of the 20th century, thankful for the safety and sanity of our time.'

'Then, perhaps, you wonder...'

#### FLESH + BLOOD

Directed by Paul Verhoeven. Produced by Gys Versluys. Screenplay by Gerard Soetman and Paul Verhoeven, based on a story by Gerard Soetman. Creative consultant, Anthony Shaffer. Director of photography, Jan De Bont. Editor, Ine Schenkan. Music, Basil Poledouris. Art director, Felix Murcia. Costume designer, Yvonne Blake. Special effects supervisor, Joe Di Gaetano. A Riverside pictures production for Orion. Cameras and lenses by Technovision. Colour by De Luxe. Cert. R.

Martin, RUTGER HAUSER; Agnes, JENNIFER JASON LEIGH; Steven, TOM BURLINSON; Hawkwood, JACK THOMPSON; Arnolfini, FERNANDO HILLBECK; Celine, SUSAN TYRRELL; Cardinal, RONALD LACEY; Karsthans, BRION JAMES; Summer, JOHN DENNIS JOHNSTON; Miel, SIMON ANDREU; Orbec, BRUNO KIRBY; Anna, KITTY COUBOIS; Polly, MARINA SAURA; Father George, HANS VEERMAN; Little John, JAKE WOOD; Niccolo, HECTOR ALTERIO; Clara, CLANCA MARSILLACH; Kathleen, NANCY CARTWRIGHT; Sterz, JORGE BOSSO; Herman, MARIO DE BARROS and Roly Poly, IDA BONS.



